horti CULTURE

for the home gardener

Number 14

Begonias

There are over 1,000 species of begonias in the tropics and subtropics of both hemispheres, with over 10,000 recorded hybrids and cultivars. While a few begonias have showy flowers, most types are grown mainly for their interesting leaves which are usually asymmetrical and often have reddish or brownish markings. The leaves may also have unusual shapes and textures.

Begonias grow best in an area protected from hard frosts with filtered or morning sun, high humidity, and well-drained soil. Most begonias do well as houseplants. A few can thrive in certain location outdoors in Southern California. Three major groups of begonias are recognized.

MAJOR GROUPS

Fibrous Rooted- Small roots emanate directly from fleshy stems.
The cane types usually have bamboo-like stems 3-6 feet tall and showy flowers most of the growing season. The "angel wings" have leaves with one lobe larger and higher than the other, resembling wings in flight.

Shrub types grow new stems from the base so they become compact and bushy. Begonias of this division are usually grown for their distinctive foliage which may be either smooth or hairy.

Semperflorens are low, shrubby begonias that need more light than is usually available indoors. Grown for both flowers and foliage as bedding plants, they bloom almost continually, but especially all summer.

Tuberous- Roots appear on large bulb-like tubers.
This type usually has large, showy flowers up to about 6" in diameter and somewhat resembling roses or camellias. They need very good drainage and high humidity. In the winter dormant period the leaves die back, leaving tubers from which new plants can develop the following spring. Tuberous begonias may become top heavy and require staking.

Rhizomatous- Roots come from large underground stems (rhizomes).
These grow their leaves from a rhizome. They are more notable for their boldly marked and colored foliage than for their flowers. The most common of this group are referred to as Rexes, after the original species, Begonia Rex, from which many varieties in this group have been bred. While most rhizomatous begonias grow well in pots indoors, the Rex varieties are often grown outdoors here.

PLANTING: Begonias are shallow rooted so they need not be planted deeply and must have a well-drained soil. A mix with plenty of compost or leaf mold is good. The Arboretum uses a growing medium of equal parts peat moss, and Sponge Rok or perlite. A mixture of 1/3 equal parts peat moss, Sponge Rok, and leaf mold or compost is easier for the home gardener to use because peat moss must be kept slightly moist. If a potting mix with a high percentage of peat moss dries out it becomes water repellant.

(OVER)

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WATERING: Let them dry between waterings. Begonias do best with humidity in the air, but not soggy soil around their roots. For humidity in our dry climate, they can be misted with a hand sprayer, or pots of begonias may be placed on top of, not in, moistened gravel. It is a good idea to group begonias close together if you have a number of them, because the water that evaporates from them will help create the humid environment in which they thrive.

FERTILIZING: Begonias require a balanced, acid fertilizer, such as one labelled for roses or camellias. The important thing here is to avoid exceeding the directed amount at any one time. Begonias respond best to small amounts of fertilizer frequently applied. A relatively new method would be to use a slow reacting fertilizer. Tuberous begonias respond even better than other types to dilute, frequent fertilizer applications. Cut down on fertilizing at the end of August to harden off outdoor begonias for the winter. When any begonia loses its leaves, or dies back to the tuber or rhizome, cease fertilizing altogether. Some begonias can be kept from going dormant by fertilizing, but this seems to cause the plants to fade away or go downhill after a few years. When your begonias burst into new growth, resume fertilizing.

LIGHT: Most begonias do best in filtered sunlight. An east window is a good location indoors.

PESTS AND DISEASES: Begonias in the right location are generally quite healthy and pest free.

With warm temperatures, high humidity, and poor air circulation, begonias may be subject to powdery mildew. Spider mites and small, cottony white masses which conceal mealy bugs may occasionally appear. Spider mites seem to clear up on their own; mealy bugs can usually be controlled by squashing. If it is necessary to use an insecticide follow container instructions very carefully. Most begonias are fairly susceptible to insecticides and can suffer leaf damage from them, so do not overspray. Spray during the cool morning hours, both because the plant is then less stressed than while it it hot, and because the plants' activity increases with heat, so it absorbs more as the day gets warmer. Water the plants well a few hours before you spray to assure that the plant is not stressed for water (dry or wilted) when you spray. This timing and water advice also applies to fertilizing. Outdoors, snail may damage begonias. Occasionally, aphids, caterpillars, or cabbage loopers may be found on begonias. Try hand picking for the larger pests. A forceful stream of water from the hose should knock off aphids, which usually cannot climb back onto the plant.

PROPAGATION: Most begonias are easy to propagate from cuttings. Stem or rhizome tips and leaves make the best cuttings. Rhizomatous begonias can also be propagated by simply breaking or cutting off a leaf and part of its leaf stem. For the rhizome propagation, cut 2-3" lengths, or enough to have 3-4 leaves remaining on the cutting. Then remove the lower two leaves, as it cannot support as many leaves as it did while attached to the plant. Start either type of cutting in a mixture of Sponge Rok or vermiculite and peat moss, or in straight sand. These porous media are preferred to soil for cuttings because they reduce the chance of fungus infection. You may start cuttings in a glass of water also. Keep the potting medium just moist, and keep the air around the cutting moist (as with a plastic tent over the pot), and keep the cutting out of direct sunlight. The cutting may take a month to produce new growth. Feed cuttings only after they are rooted and growing.

3/78

Additional information can be obtained at:
Los Angeles State and County Arboretum - 681-8411
Descanso Gardens - 790-5571
South Coast Botanic Garden - 772-5813